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Secret research

Budget cuts may force UD to drop ban

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A BAN ON secret government research at the University of Delaware — in effect since the Vietnam War protests — may end up as a casualty of the Reagan budget cuts.

Ending the ban is one of several alternatives that university administrators are considering to brace the school against expected cuts in government research funds for non-classified work.

The other alternatives, proposed by an eight-member committee appointed last spring to reconcile the need for more money with the ethical questions involved in secret government research, are:

- To create a legally separate, off-campus institute for secret research.

- To set up a panel of senior faculty members to review proposed projects and decide on their suitability.

- To retain the ban.

University President E.A. Trabant is reviewing the report but has not said when he will present the matter to the university board of trustees.

Trabant warned the trustees at their December meeting that an increased Defense Department budget and an emphasis on building military strength means that more money will go to secret government research than to non-classified work.

"Over the next few years, [sources of federal support of research] will change, and it will have an effect on the educational programs of our university," Trabant said.

"The real dollar backing of research by the National Science Foundation will decline markedly over the next few years. In some universities, there will be a substantial increase in research support from the Department of Defense. The question is, will this occur at our university," he said.

While Trabant apparently was priming the university's trustees for the change in policy, Henry L. Ship

chairman of the study committee, is playing down the prospects of renewed classified research at the university.

The decision to allow secret work in university facilities may not be made for several more years, Shipman said, although officials see a trend in the direction of funding.

The university's dilemma — and the temptation it faces — can be seen in the budgets of three federal agencies that dole out billions of dollars to researchers every year.

In 1980, the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health distributed about \$3 billion for academic research. The university received \$3.9 million from those two agencies in the 1979-80 school year.

The Defense Department research budget last year was more than five times the combined budgets of the two agencies, topping \$16.5 billion. The university received only about \$500,000, according to a university administrator.

In fiscal 1982, Defense Department spending for research has grown to almost \$20 billion. The budget of the National Science Foundation was cut by almost \$1 million, and the budget of the National Institutes of Health, while increased about 2 percent, has less spending power if inflation is taken into account, according to spokesmen for the agencies.

Pentagon officials will not say what portion of their budget will go for classified research — that information itself is classified — but Shipman said the prevailing opinion among university educators is that much of it will go toward classified work.

And the university, which will see less money from the National Science Foundation and from the National Institutes of Health, must decide whether to go after some of those defense funds.

According to James Oliver, a political science professor and committee member, there is more at stake than simply deciding whether secret research should be

"You have a more profound question," he said. "What is the relationship of government to the academic community? Those of us who came out of grad school during the late '60s and early '70s may not look at it the way our colleagues who came out earlier do."

Near the end of the Vietnam War — and for some years afterward — many universities shied away from government research that could be used by the military. But in recent years, they have been more willing to accept contracts for defense-related research, while at the same time looking for ways to avoid the appearance of impropriety.

One alternative proposed by the University of Delaware committee is modeled after the approach taken by MIT and Johns Hopkins University — the creation of an "arms-length," off-campus research institute to conduct government work.

Although the concept is only in rough outline form, Shipman says the committee proposed creating an institute affiliated with the University of Delaware with facilities available to faculty members and scientists from outside the school. It would be located somewhere "not too far, but fairly remote," he said, adding that Hockessin had been mentioned as a possible site.

Shipman says the reason for seeking an off-campus site is to avoid the effects that the facility might have if it were on campus. "I wouldn't want to see buildings on this campus with 'No Admittance' signs on them," he said. "It could have a chilling effect on people."

Committee member Robert G. Dean, a professor of civil engineering, said another alternative is the formation of a group of disinterested senior faculty members to pass judgment on which projects will be accepted and which will not.

"There are different types of classified research," he said, "some of which I would classify as a little on the sinister side. This type of research should definitely not be done; the question is who should make that indomest call."